

The Factory on Show: Rethinking the Visibility of Industry (18th-21st c.)



Office and restaurant of the « Raffinerie de l'Île-de-France », now TotalEnergies platform at Grandpuits (file [IA77050075](#)). Meeting room with three panels illustrating oil processing. IVR11_20247700021NUC4A_detail (c) Stéphane Asseline, Région Île-de-France, 2024.

Argument

Addressing the question of how the “industrial world” and the emblematic “factory” have been exhibited since the eighteenth century first requires us to set the analytical framework regarding places (factories, workshops, and industrial sites), people (workers, engineers, entrepreneurs), machinery, manufactured goods (including their design), and their representations (painting, graphic arts, prints, photography, stained glass, sculpture, plans, models, and films). As we know, exhibitions are never neutral, and may serve to promote particular images, whether those of a brand mark shaped by industrialists, of a territory, a trade, a patron, or an institution.

The representation of the factory by cultural institutions has never been self-evident. Testimonies from museum professionals and exhibition curators, including those involved in recent projects, reveal the persistent challenges associated with exhibiting industry, a subject that has largely remained confined to specialised institutions and narratives centred on innovation¹. The history of innovation itself encompasses a range of specific exhibition formats and dedicated spaces, such as international and industrial exhibitions². Innovation and performance, however, are only two among many possible interpretative frameworks. Their prominence has often obscured more enduring realities, including imitation, the acquisition of patents, routine production, fragmented manufacturing systems, technological coexistence, and resistance to technological change.

The framework adopted for this two-days conference is the museum understood in its broadest sense. Rather than limiting the discussion to the contemporary definition of the museum (ICOM, 24 August 2022), we seek to encompass the diverse meanings and forms that this institution has

¹ See the European project *Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration* (MaILHoC, 2023-2025).

² For instance, the *Salon des Arts ménagers* or the *Salon international de l'innovation et de la prospective* in France.

assumed over the period under consideration³. Whether specialised or generalist, temporary or permanent, situated within industrial environments or detached from them, interdisciplinary or otherwise, the museum is approached here as a long-term site for making visible processes of rationalisation and mechanisation through the powerful symbol of the factory.

This inquiry therefore embraces a wide variety of institutions, including fine-art museums, applied arts and decorative arts collections, museums of arts and crafts, social history and civilisation museums, museums of modern and contemporary art, art centres, foundations, former factories converted into museums, ecomuseums, science, industry and design centres, regional, international and world exhibitions, corporate museums, technology museums, and trade fairs. Decentralised, site-specific, and off-site museum initiatives are equally relevant to this investigation.

Accordingly, our approach to exhibition practices is deliberately inclusive. We consider institutional frameworks, venues, patrons, audiences, voices, networks, and transfers, alongside the diversity of objects, machines, and representations displayed, as well as forms of resistance and processes of invisibilisation. This investigation seeks to sketch a preliminary historical landscape of the phenomenon at an international scale. Rather than simply reaffirming the underrepresentation of the factory—or a broader reluctance to engage with industry within cultural institutions—we aim to examine the place of industrial production within museums while taking into account the full range of activities that shape exhibitions: surveying, collecting, commissioning, acquiring, documenting, researching, and disseminating.

The thread running through this inquiry is the image of the factory, as transmitted and perceived through a wide variety of forms, functions, and configurations. The term “factory” is understood in its historical depth as a built—or sometimes projected—space organised for production and bringing together labour, energy sources, materials, and machinery. We are therefore interested in all representations of the factory, meaning realistic, imagined, comprehensive, fragmentary, or simulated, regardless of the industrial process involved, the definitions applied to the site under consideration (industrial architecture, machine-building, extraction sites, including temporary installations), or the symbolic meanings attached to these images, whether promotional or critical. While exhibitions are a phenomenon extending from the eighteenth century to the present, the exhibited factory may itself originate in much earlier periods, sharing some characteristics—such as concentration of the workspace, use of mechanical power, and serial production—with the mill, the manufactory, and the workshop. The historical depth of industrial sites itself raises issues about contemporary strategies of representation. One may think, for example, of the *Catalan forge* reconstructed at the Barcelona International Exposition of 1929–1930 within a context of Catalan cultural and nationalist affirmation⁴. Reconstructions of ancient and medieval industrial sites likewise deserve attention, particularly in relation to their educational functions, as illustrated by the presentation of the Barbegal mills at the Musée départemental Arles Antique, in France.

By examining the museum as both a filter and a recipient of representations of the factory, we seek to assess the place occupied by this industrial space within the broader cultural production associated with industry, including literature, music, print culture, the visual arts, and cinema. Drawing on the work of Nathalie Grande and Chantal Pierre on literary representations⁵, we question how exhibitions and museums contribute to build up the image of industrialisation. What do they reveal, conceal, or unintentionally expose? How do they engage with the transformations, benefits, and harms generated by processes that have profoundly shaped societies since the eighteenth century? What narratives of industrialisation and its consequences have they produced?

³ Bruno Brulon Soares (dir.), dossier « Defining the museum: challenges and compromises of the 21st century », *Icofom Study series*, n° 48-2, 2020, p. 33-50. [En ligne] <https://journals.openedition.org/iss/2295>

⁴ Jean Cantelaube, *La forge à la catalane dans les Pyrénées ariégeoises, une industrie à la montagne, XVII-XIX siècle*, Toulouse, CNRS-Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 2005, p. 60.

⁵ Nathalie Grande et Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou, *Légendes noires, légendes dorées : ou comment la littérature fabrique l'histoire, XVII^e-XIX^e siècle*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018.

What political and ideological discourses do they convey? What does the factory symbolise, and to which imaginaries does it belong?

The objective is to grasp the implications of a phenomenon that, despite its persistence and significance, has remained largely undertheorised, across a period that has already encompassed several “industrial revolutions”: mechanisation, extractivism, the rise and consolidation of the labour movement, colonisation, Americanisation, rationalisation, automation, and digitalisation, together with the ongoing reconfiguration of the factory in the era of decarbonisation, the Anthropocene, and Industry 4.0—from the green factory to the “re-enchanted” factory. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which changing representations of the factory have intersected with processes of industrial heritage-making, including the preservation of archives and sites through national inventories, historic monument programmes, and industrial archaeology.

Finally, this conference examines the museum as a stage—in its more contemporary sense—upon which themes traditionally external to artistic practice are represented: the factory, industrialisation, and the industrial world through its sites and artefacts.

We invite case studies that enable us to map, historicise, and compare the spaces in which these themes and this object—the factory, understood both as container and as content—have been exhibited since the eighteenth century. Contributions may seek to identify recurring challenges associated with their display, highlight moments when exhibitions responded to ongoing industrial transformations, and deepen our understanding of the actors who promoted them. While the programme of the two study days will likely combine chronological and thematic approaches, we propose the following cross-cutting themes:

Institutional Histories

The creation and subsequent development of many museums have incorporated the industrial world into their thematic focus and, later, into their cultural and scholarly missions. Examples include the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, the Union centrale des Arts décoratifs, the Centre de création industrielle, the Musée d’Orsay, and a wide range of local and community museums. The aim is not to reconstruct the history of these institutions as such, but rather to understand how industrial themes—and the factory in particular—became integrated into, or excluded from, their activities. What were the key moments of acceptance, transformation, or rejection? Through which concepts, terminologies, and intellectual frameworks was this process articulated? What vision of the modern world did these institutions promote?

Promoters and Professional Circulation

The professional trajectories of curators, collection managers, researchers, and exhibition makers offer a valuable perspective on the emergence, dissemination, and occasional marginalisation of industrial themes. Exhibition projects may be analysed in relation to academic research, teaching, professional training, and relationships with industrial and entrepreneurial environments. We are equally interested in the patrons and sponsors who encouraged representations of the factory, their motivations for doing so, and the narratives they sought to advance.

The Exhibition as Project, Research Process, and Event

Whether realised or never brought to completion, exhibitions themselves constitute a central object of investigation. Event-centred microhistory provides a means of analysing contexts, actors, funding structures, implementation processes, object selection, exhibition design, interpretative narratives, audiences, and both immediate and long-term reception.

Fetish and Myth

Closely connected to the former theme, this axis examines the value, symbolic status, heritage trajectories, and imaginaries associated with displayed objects and sites: the artefact or image that comes to stand for a far more complex industrial reality. Particular attention will be paid to the transformation of manufactured objects into works of art through museum display and their inclusion—or exclusion—from collections. This raises broader questions concerning private and public collecting, acquisition policies, documentation practices, and the institutional conditions that enabled or hindered the preservation of objects and images associated with industrial production.

The Factory as Emblem?

This theme focuses specifically on the place of factory buildings and production systems within exhibitions. How much sites, buildings, installations, and manufacturing processes are made visible to museum audiences? What strategies are used to convey the complexity of environments that constantly evolve over time? How is the iconic image of the factory—first disseminated through engraving and drawing, later through photography—built up and transformed? How do these representations circulate, and how do they interact with photographic campaigns and broader visual policies?

The Industrial Artist

One distinctive feature of this field is the emergence of a particular artistic figure: the industrial artist. This theme seeks to examine the role of museums and collections in establishing the historiographical legitimacy of this intermediary figure, whose emergence accompanied industrialisation itself. It also invites to question the role of the factory, whether viewed from within or from without, in shaping artistic production and representation.

Which industrial artists—painters, photographers, filmmakers, designers—have achieved recognition, and which remain overlooked? What criteria define this category? Is the industrial artist simply an attentive observer, or is direct participation into labour constitutive of that identity? What place do works produced outside industrial settings occupy in the reception of these artists? How do such figures fit within an art history that has undergone significant renewal since the early 2000s? Finally, should engineers and inventors celebrated within similar frameworks also be regarded as alternative “artists of industry”?



Corbeil Grands Moulins (file IA91001069). Power plant built in 1920 and turned into a refectory c. 1950.
Not in use since 2005.

IVR11_20209100605NUC4A (c) Philippe Ayrault, Région Île-de-France, 2020.

Indicative List of Museum Exhibitions in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries (Non-Exhaustive)

Die Industrie in der Bildenden Kunst (Kunstmuseum Essen, 1912); *Machine Art and Useful Household Objects under \$5.00* (MoMA, 1938); *Robert Maillart: Engineer* (MoMA, 1947); *Formes utiles* (UCAD, Pavillon de Marsan, 1949–1950); *8 Automobiles* (MoMA, 1951); *Les Peintres témoins de leur temps : le travail* (Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1951) ; *Au pays des mines* (André Fougeron, galerie Bernheim-Jeune, 1951) ; *Les Artistes et les usines à fer* (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Liège, 1955); *Les Mines, les forges et les arts* (Musée des Travaux publics, Paris, 1955); *Art et travail* (Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, 1957); *Art et Travail* (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Charleroi, 1958); *Forces et rythmes de l'industrie: Reynold Arnould* (UCAD, Pavillon de Marsan, 1959); *Formes industrielles: une exposition internationale* (UCAD, Pavillon de Marsan, 1963); *Baccarat 1764–1964 and Christofle: 100 ans d'avant-garde de Napoléon III à nos jours* (UCAD, Pavillon de Marsan, 1964); *Forschung und Technik in der Kunst* (Bürgermeister-Ludwig-Reichert-Haus, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, 1965); *Tricentenaire de Charleroi. Maximilien Luce* (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Charleroi, 1966); *Le Musée dans l'usine: collection Peter Stuyvesant* (UCAD, Pavillon de Marsan, 1966); *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester City Art Gallery, 1968); *Qu'est-ce que le Design ?* (UCAD, Centre de Création Industrielle, Paris, 1969–1970); *Bernhard och Hilla Becher: form genom funktion* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm and Malmö, 1970); *Bolide Design: voitures de course* (UCAD, Pavillon de Marsan, 1970); *L'Usine. Travail et architecture* (Centre de Création Industrielle, Pavillon de Marsan, 1973); *Social Concern and the Worker: French Prints from 1830 to 1910* (Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City; Cleveland Museum of Art; Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1973–1974); *Projects: Bernhard and Hilla Becher* (MoMA, 1975–1976); *François Bonhomme dit le Forgeron* (Musée de l'Histoire du Fer, Jarville-la-Malgrange, 1976); *La Représentation du travail: mines, forges, usines* (Écomusée de la Communauté urbaine Le Creusot–Montceau-les-Mines, Château de la Verrerie, 1977); *Le travail et ses représentations* (Maison de la Culture, Grenoble, 1978); *Architecture*

d'ingénieurs, XIXe et XXe siècles (Centre de Création Industrielle, Centre Pompidou, 1978–1979); *Kunst und Technik in den 20er Jahren* (Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, 1980); *American Realism and the Industrial Age* (Cleveland Museum of Art; Kenneth C. Beck Center, Lakewood; Columbus Museum of Art, 1981); *Images du travail: peintures et dessins des collections françaises* (Musée national Fernand Léger, Biot, 1985); *Lieux de travail?* (Centre de Création Industrielle, Centre Pompidou, 1986); *L'usine et la ville. 150 ans d'urbanisme, 1836–1986* (Institut français d'architecture, Paris, 1986); *L'industrie Thonet* (Musée d'Orsay, 1986–1987); *Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734–1797* (Tate Gallery, London; Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1990); *Les Schneider, Le Creusot. Une famille, une entreprise, une ville, 1836–1960* (Musée d'Orsay, 1995); *La mine en son miroir* (Musées de Saint-Étienne, 1995); *François Bonhommé, peintre témoin de la vie industrielle au XIXe siècle* (Musée de l'Histoire du Fer, Jarville-la-Malgrange, 1996); *Menzel (1815–1905): la névrose du vrai* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1997); *Paysage industriel à Vienne, d'usines en usines* (Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Vienne, 1998); *Raymond Rochette, dessins. L'industrie, source d'inspiration de l'œuvre d'art* (Écomusée de la Communauté urbaine Le Creusot–Montceau-les-Mines, 1997–1998); *Des cheminées dans la plaine, 1830–1930* (Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Saint-Denis, 1998); *L'Œil, le geste et l'espace. Une histoire de la représentation du travail* (Centre des Archives du Monde du Travail, Roubaix, 1998); *Travail et banlieue, 1880–1980: regards d'artistes* (Musée de l'Île-de-France, Sceaux, 2001); *Des plaines à l'usine: images du travail dans la peinture française, 1870–1914* (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dunkerque, 2001–2002); *Die zweite Schöpfung. Bilder der industriellen Welt vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart* (Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, 2002); *Papetiers des Alpes* (Musée Dauphinois, 2005); *Les artistes et l'usine, 1850–1950* (Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Belfort, 2009); *Feuerländer* (LVR-Industriemuseum, Oberhausen, 2010); *Félix Thiollier (1842–1914): Photographs* (Musée d'Orsay, 2012–2013); *Les Paris de l'industrie, 1750–1920* (Réfectoire des Cordeliers, Paris, 2014); *Le monde de Paul-Martial: les choses ordinaires* (Kunstmuseum Basel, 2014); *L'art et la machine* (Musée des Confluences, Lyon, 2015–2016); *Des machines au service du peuple* (Familistère de Guise, 2017); *Les villes ardentes. Art, travail, révolte, 1870–1914* (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, 2020); *Fourchambault et Abainville, deux forges sous le pinceau de François Bonhommé* (Musée de la Faïence et des Beaux-Arts de Nevers, 2020); *Évolutions industrielles* (Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, 2022–2023); *Architecture in the Age of Industry* (MoMA, New York, 2023); *Photographing Industry at War: A Controlled Narrative (1915–1919)* (ECPAD, Hôtel du Département, Blois, 2025); *And Then There Was Work: A Social and Urban History of Labour in the Suburbs* (Maison de Banlieue et de l'Architecture, Athis-Mons, 2025); *Cities at Work: Histories of Photographic Collections* (Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Étienne, 2026).

Selected Bibliography

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- Bonnet, Emmanuel, Diego Landivar and Alexandre Monnin, *Héritage et fermeture : une écologie du démantèlement*, Paris, Éditions Divergences, 2021.
- Cartier, Claudine, 'Des musées d'art et d'industrie aux musées de site industriel', in Jean-François Belhoste, Serge Benoit, Serge Chassagne and Philippe Mioche (eds), *Autour de l'industrie, histoire et patrimoine. Mélanges offerts à Denis Woronoff*, Paris, CHEFF, 2004, pp. 247–264.
- Clifford, Helen, 'The Myth of the Maker: Manufacturing Networks in the London Goldsmiths' Trade, 1750–1790', in Kenneth Quickenden and Neal Adrian Quickenden (eds), *Silver & Jewellery: Production and Consumption since 1750*, Birmingham, University of Central England, 1995, pp. 5–12.
- Cras, Sophie, *L'Œil capitaliste : musées, commerce et colonisation*, Paris, Flammarion, 2026.
- Dagen, Philippe and the Institut national du patrimoine / École du Louvre (eds), *Ce qu'exposer veut dire*, series of conferences and study days, 2013–2026.
- Dufaux, Lionel (ed.), *Le Musée des arts et métiers : guide des collections*, Paris, RMN–Grand Palais / Musée des Arts et Métiers / CNAM, 2020.

Call for papers International conference, 2027

- Lutz Engelskirschen « Eisen und Stahl. Ausstellungen zum Industriebild in Deutschland », in *Die zweite Schöpfung, Bilder der industriellen Welt vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart* cat. exp. Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2002, p. 108-113.
- Keith Falconer, « The industrial heritage in Britain – the first fifty years », *La revue pour l'histoire du CNRS*, 14, 2006 [en ligne].
- Yohann Guffroy, *Les traits de l'invention : production et usages du dessin d'objet technique en Angleterre au tournant du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Presses des Mines, 2025. 265 p.
- Florence Hachez-Leroy (dir.), « Musées et collections d'entreprises », dossier, *Patrimoine industriel, CILAC* n° 58, juin 2011.
- Jean-Charles Leyris, « Objets de grève, un patrimoine militant », *In Situ. Revue des patrimoines*, 8, 2007, p. 1-18.
- Harald A. Mieg et Heike Oevermann (eds), *Industrial Heritage Sites in Transformation*, New York, Routledge, 2014.
- Harry Parker, « The neoliberal museum? Commercialization, cultural policy and exhibitions in late-twentieth century Europe », Science Museum Group, 2025. [En ligne]
- Nicolas Pierrot, *Les images de l'industrie en France, peintures, dessins, estampes, 1760-1870*, thèse de doctorat d'Histoire de l'Université Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne, D. Woronoff et A-F. Garçon dir., 2010, 3 vol., 2010.
- Gwenaële Rot et François Vatin (dir.), *L'esthétique des Trente glorieuses : de la Reconstruction à la croissance industrielle*, Trouville-sur-Mer, édition Librairie des musées, 2021. 295 p.
- Frédéric Rousseau et Jean-François Thomas (dir.), *La fabrique de l'événement*, Paris, Michel Houdiard éditeur, 2009. 375 p.
- Barry Turner, *Beacon for change. How the 1951 Festival of Britain shaped the modern age*, Londres, Aurum Press, 2011.

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Further Information

Proposals of no more than 400 words should be submitted to the members of the organising committee by **30 October 2026**.

The workshop will take place during two days in **Paris in March 2027**. Papers may be delivered in either French or English. The organisers are currently considering the use of AI-assisted automatic translation.

Limited funding may be available to contribute towards speakers' travel and accommodation costs. Remote participation by videoconference will also be possible for contributors who prefer this option.

A publication is planned following the conference. Contributors will be invited to submit full papers in either French or English shortly after the event.

If you have any question, please contact:

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Call for papers
International conference, 2027

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Power plant EDF at Vaires-sur-Marne.
The maintenance workshop decorated by a worker [last quarter of 20th c.].
IVR11_20087700283NUC4A_2 (c) Laurent Kruszyk, Région Île-de-France, 2008.

